

Drinking in Proverbs

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Introduction.

Ever since Lauren and I moved to Illinois from Texas in 2006, there have been a number of cultural differences to which we've had to adjust. In Beaumont, a man who finds a bunch of crawfish on his property invites his friends over for a meal; in Illinois, he hires an exterminator. In Houston, a 70-degree day is an excuse to bundle up; in Joliet, that means it's time to fire up the grill. In Texas, if you get on an elevator with a stranger, you're likely to know his life story by the time you reach your floor; in Illinois, if you say hi to somebody on an elevator, they look at you out of the corner of their eye and start edging away like you're about to try to mug them. Any place is going to have quirks like that.

Some cultural differences, though, aren't so benign. After Lauren and I had been driving around town for a couple weeks, we got to noticing that in some parts of Joliet, literally every street corner has a bar on it. Now, don't get me wrong—there are plenty of drunks in Texas too, but there also seems to be the cultural notion that if you drink, you ought to do your drinking in private. Up here, it's almost as if the bar holds the neighborhood together, that it, rather than a church or a community center, is the place you go where everybody knows your name.

When a practice is so deeply ingrained in a culture as drinking is here, many people are quick to defend it and to react with hostility to criticism. However, our knee-jerk reaction should be less important to us than the teaching of the word. The Bible, to say the least, does not present drinking in a positive light. Bible characters from Noah to Ben-Hadad got in trouble when they got drunk. God's word warns us in no uncertain terms about the foolishness of drinking and the disastrous consequences it invites. Let's consider these things as we look at the topic of drinking in Proverbs.

The Basic Problem.

When we look at God's word, we see that there is a basic problem with drinking. This problem is presented in Proverbs 20:1. The point is that alcohol will lead the foolish astray. If we drink, it will dull our inhibitions, give free rein to every evil desire, and get us in trouble physically, mentally, and spiritually. In our culture, we want to draw a bright line between drunk and not-drunk, as though there were some massive change that happens within us at precisely .08 BAC. In reality, intoxication is on a sliding scale. The more we drink, the greater its effects become, but those effects are present in some form from the first glass we consume. That's why God doesn't want us drinking. As Christians, we shouldn't get as close as we can to some invented standard of drunkenness. We should avoid alcohol altogether.

The specific application that this verse makes is that wine is a mocker and strong drink is a brawler. In the first place, alcohol will loosen our tongues. After we drink, we start saying whatever we think, without regard to its truth, without regard to how somebody else might take it. When we're under the influence, all of those hard lessons about prudent speech that we've spent years or decades learning go right out the window. Drinking leads us to sin with our lips.

Naturally, once we start mouthing off to everybody we come in contact with, that's where the brawling part comes in. Since the first beer was brewed, how many billions and billions of fights do you think there have been that got touched off by alcohol? How many men have stabbed or shot somebody else, because they were too liquored up to know better? How many marriages have gone down the tubes because the husband started drinking and got lippy, or worse yet, started drinking and raised a hand to his wife? The destructive impact of alcohol would be hard to overestimate.

Of course, angry words and angry deeds are far from the only evil thoughts given free rein by drinking. Solomon could just as easily have said that wine is a lecher and strong drink a fornicator. People in the world talk all the time about "beer goggles," where somebody you wouldn't have gone near while sober starts looking better the more you drink. Why is it that gatherings from parties on Fraternity Row to bars on Friday night all involve alcohol? Simple—it's because the booze serves as an enabler for all the sexual immorality that the participants want to engage in. If we drink, we can be certain that the alcohol will destroy our self-control too, and it can easily lead to the most vile, dangerous immorality.

King Lemuel's Mother.

We see an even broader perspective on the problems associated with drinking in the advice given to King Lemuel by his mother in Proverbs 31. This advice begins in Proverbs 31:4-5. At first glance vs. 4 doesn't seem to apply to us. Most of us are common folk, and we don't think of ourselves as having the same royal status as Lemuel. However, even though we may not wear a crown and sit on a throne, we are still brothers and sisters of the King. Every Christian, because of the relationship we have with God and Jesus, is royalty in waiting. If we are faithful to the Lord, Paul promises us in 2 Timothy 2 that we will reign with Him. What's not for kings, then, ought not be for us either.

The next verse tells us why alcohol is such a problem for kings. The danger is that if they drink, they will forget the law and fail to judge wisely. There are both earthly and eternal applications for this point. First, the more we drink,

the less capable we become. Our minds are very delicate instruments, and when we drink, we impair them, obviously when we're intoxicated, but less obviously, even afterward. If you've ever talked to an alcoholic, even when he's sober, you know what I'm talking about. The damage is most conspicuous in those who have abused alcohol the most, but every drop we consume pushes us a little bit closer to that point. That means that everything we drink makes us just that little bit less competent at work. We miss things and create problems that we could have avoided if we'd never imbibed. In some cases, this can lead to us losing our jobs entirely, and indeed becoming unemployable.

The same problems exist in the spiritual realm. Not only is it a bad decision to drink, drinking impairs our ability to make good decisions in future. Let me tell you, folks, as a Christian, I need all my wits about me. Satan is constantly on the attack, and his assaults are often so subtle that even when I'm fully alert, I don't see the danger until it's too late. When our spiritual health is so dependent on operating at our peak, and when the enemy is so devious and unrelenting, it is the very height of foolishness to do anything that would impair our judgment, just as drinking does. Drinking can cost us our jobs and our marriages in this life, but it can just as easily cost us our souls in the next.

The fact that we have so much to lose is precisely why we shouldn't drink. Look at Lemuel's mother's next thoughts on the subject in Proverbs 31:6-7. Of course, this is neither a command nor an exhortation for poor, unhappy people to drink. Instead, this is a command to us. It's a command to leave booze to those miserable wretches who have no future, no hope, and no God, and who know it. Liquor isn't for us, though, because we're better than that. We have reason to live. We have dignity, value, and purpose. We don't need alcohol because we have Jesus.

Where Drinking Leads.

Let's turn our attention, though, to one final context in Proverbs, that describes where drinking leads. It begins with Proverbs 23:29-30. This passage starts with a catalog of problems that people can have, and then goes on to attribute them to drinking. Like so many Scriptures in Proverbs, this one warns us that a course of action that looks appealing is actually disastrous. There are lots and lots of folks out there who use alcohol as medicine. They're unhappy with some aspect of their lives, and so they try to drown their sorrows in drink. The problem is, of course, that drinking doesn't make our problems go away. It just postpones them and makes them worse. Never since the beginning of the world has the poor man become less poor because he took to drink. Never has a bad marriage been improved by alcohol. Never has a stressful work life become less stressful. Instead, when we wake up the next morning with a pounding headache and a mouth that tastes like a litter box, we find out that our problems are still right there with us, and we may well have added to them during the night. The more we drink to escape from life, the more unbearable life becomes.

That's important to remember, all the more so because alcohol is so alluring. Consider the Proverbs writer's comments on it in Proverbs 23:31-32. As we're going through and examining all the reasons why alcohol is so dangerous, we can't forget its undeniable appeal. To be honest, that's not an appeal that I've ever felt personally, but I know that in that, I'm much more the exception than the rule. Satan doesn't get us to drink by pointing out all the miseries and dangers associated with it. Instead, he plays up the "good" parts of drinking. He tries to get us to buy in to all those beer commercials during football games, where the guy with the can in his hand is surrounded by a pack of beautiful, half-naked women and muscled-up jock types having a good time. Sex, companionship, fun—that's what alcohol promises.

Of course, we never see any ads depicting the drunk on Skid Row, huddled up on the heating grate with his bottle of hooch. We never see the six-year-old girl with the split lip sobbing in the corner because her boozed-up daddy just backhanded her one. We never see the sorority girl waking up the morning after to the realization that she was raped while she was passed out. We never see the broken marriages, the broken promises, the broken lives. And yet, of all the millions of people who have been ruined by alcohol, they all have one thing in common. Not one of them saw it coming. When first they took a sip of liquor, not one of them expected what was going to happen. In fact, the opposite is true. Every one of them said, "It won't happen to me." That means that if WE drink because we think it won't happen to us, we need to think again. We need to remember that though alcohol may sparkle in the cup, in the end, it stings like a viper.

Alcohol, though, doesn't just distort our situation. It distorts who we are. Look at the warning of Proverbs 23:33-35. Because alcohol is a mind-altering drug, when we drink, our minds are altered. We see things that aren't really there. We say things that we could never have imagined would pass our lips. We become a different person, and the more we drink, the more permanent that different person becomes, and the more the real us is lost.

When Solomon says that we become like one who lies down on the top of a mast, here's what he's getting at. Back in Solomon's day, sailing ships were small, and they got tossed around on the waves like toys. The top of the mast was the part that saw the most motion. It was not uncommon for a mast top to go through a 90-degree arc during heavy seas. Somebody sleeping on that mast would be in terrible danger, but not realize it. So too it is with the drinker. All of these terrible things are happening to him, but he doesn't care. All he cares about is getting his next fix. The danger, though, isn't any less real. Drinking imperils everything that is dear to us, our finances, our relationships, our lives, and our souls. There is no good reason to take on that risk. There is no good reason for a Christian to drink.